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NATIONAL COUNCIL PANEL
RETURNS FROM MIDEAST

NEW YORK -- A high-level panel of National Council of Churches officers and communion heads, designed to help the Council deal with Middle East issues as it develops a new policy statement on the region, has returned from a two-week fact-finding tour of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Israel and the West Bank.

Panel chairman Tracey K. Jones, Jr., the Council's first vice president, said the group had been deeply impressed by the complex and comprehensive nature of the issues dividing the region. "Confronting a situation on its home grounds always makes one aware of how much more complicated issues are than they look from a distance," the United Methodist leader noted.

"But we sensed that something is happening in the Middle East that is positive and hopeful. There are signs of hope; one is the Camp David accords and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, which showed that negotiated agreements, at least regarding the Sinai, were possible; the other is the growing national identity of the Palestinian people and the broadening international recognition of their rights.

"There is a desire for peace, a hope that 30 years of war can be brought to some kind of resolution."

The 16-member panel -- which included Sonia Francis, NCC vice president for communication and Radio-TV Officer at the Episcopal Church Center -- met with several U.S. ambassadors and more than 50 religious, political and cultural leaders of the region. These included King Hussein of Jordan, Israel's Minister of Justice Shmuel Tamir, Egypt's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Butros Ghali, Jerusalem's Mayor Teddy Kollek and Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

"This was a fact-finding trip, and we were inundated with information," Jones said. "The people we saw and the information we received were overwhelming, in terms of importance, complexity and the tremendous diversity of viewpoints expressed.

"One man we talked to commented that we were the first group he had seen that came not with a ready-made point of view but because we truly wanted to understand the complex issues at the heart of the conflict."

Claire Randall, the Council's general secretary, added that "This was a rare opportunity for a group to deal with all three major pieces of the Mideast puzzle -- the Arab states, Israel and the Palestinians."

"We also had the unusual opportunity to talk with representatives of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We met with Pope Shenouda of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, Gabriel Habib, general secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, in Lebanon, the patriarchs of the Syrian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Churches in Syria, and a number of religious persons in Israel."

Jones noted that the panel had asked local leaders to set up its itinerary in each area. "We wanted to look at the issues through the eyes of the people who live there," he explained, "and every possible door was opened for us to do that."

"We do not claim in any sense to have the knowledge, the wisdom, the sensitivity or the access to try to resolve these issues," he added. "But we do sense something positive: we sense that there is a new moment in the Middle East, with fresh possibilities for peace."

"We believe we have some role to play as communicators with our own church people and our own government. Beyond that, we will have to lean on the Spirit to lead us to any other creative roles we might be able to play."

Before making its report to the NCC Governing Board -- which meets in Indianapolis May 8-9 -- the panel has scheduled meetings with American Jewish and American Palestinian leaders. In addition to its report to the board, which sets policy for the 32-communion Council, the panel will have input into the final drafting of the new policy statement on the Middle East.

That statement will be discussed for the first time by the Governing Board in May. According to normal NCC procedures, it will be up for a final vote at the board's November 1980 meeting in New York.

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